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## THE DISRUPTED RHYTHM OF PUBLIC SPACES UNDER THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: A CASE STUDY FROM MUMBAI METROPOLITAN REGION

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### Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has paralyzed public life world-wide. The need for maintaining physical/social distance has led to a change in the order and nature of human activities across public spaces. As a result, the usual rhythm of activities in public spaces has come to be disrupted. Taking this into consideration, the study delves into the disrupted rhythm of the urban public spaces under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequently imposed lockdown. By adopting a case study-based approach, an in-depth analysis has been carried out to comprehend the change in the daily rhythm of a local road in the wake of the pandemic and lockdown. Lefebvre's technique of 'rhythmanalysis' has been applied to carry out this study, as it is highly suited in studying the flow of everyday life in a spatiotemporal context. The article traces the change in the rhythm of activities in the study area during the pandemic and lockdown in comparison to the usual rhythm of activities that existed in the area before the pandemic. The findings of the study reveal that the pandemic has taken a toll on the study area, where the pre-existing rhythm of the public space has been overtaken by a disrupted rhythm that has given rise to chaos and confusion.

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### 1.0 Introduction:

Public spaces such as streets, squares, sidewalks, local markets, playgrounds, and parks are an integral part of the urban public realm. In general, the urban public spaces function as eventful entities embedded with different meanings that are derived from the day-to-day interactions and activities of the urbanites. Public spaces have been existent since ancient times. The Athenian Agora, the Roman Forum, the European squares, and the Indian *chowks* are well-known examples of public spaces that have been a part of the ancient cityscapes (Mahadevia 2015). Public spaces are the center of activities of public life. Since times immemorial people have been using them for meetings, discussions, deals, negotiations, casual chit-chats, events, and so on. It is the element of public that gives it meaning by turning it into a place of vibrancy and exuberance. Public spaces are traditionally linked to socio-economic and cultural exchanges

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and are especially gaining recognition in the context of urban areas as a significant component of the everyday quality of life (Festas 2012).

Places in general are temporal milieus with distinctive rhythmic tempos of their own (Wunderlich 2013). Maregi (2017) points out that space configurations and the practices associated with their use in everyday life are often unexpected as well as interwoven. The transient character of the urban public spaces becomes evident from the distinctive temporal rhythms depicted by them throughout the day. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for maintaining social distance have confronted the public spaces with a functionality crisis, which has disrupted their rhythm in ways never imagined before. Although pandemics, in general, contribute to the disturbance of the 'rhythmic tempo' of a place, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic the measures imposed by the government such as lockdown, home quarantine, and other associated regulations have significantly shaped human behaviors across spaces. This has become most evident in the public spaces, where with the imposition of the lockdown, the changing nature of human behavior and interaction has disrupted the pre-existing rhythms. By using a real-world scenario from the study area, the present article delves into the disruption of rhythm in public spaces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures of lockdown declared to control it.

## **2.0 Methodology:**

The methodology of the study is grounded in the technique of 'rhythmanalysis' propounded by Lefebvre's (2004). In simple terms, rhythmanalysis is a framework for studying the flow of everyday life in a spatiotemporal context. Simpson (2012) suggests that public space enables examining the complex interrelationship that exists between multitudes of different temporalities and the organizations and functioning that result from them in the everyday urban life. Rhythms in the context of everyday life and space can be witnessed in the form of auditory and visual experiences depicting the transient as well as continual characteristics of the socio-spatial settings (Cihanger Ribeiro 2019). The existing scholarship on the technique has established its viability as an effective research tool in social and spatial sciences (Brighenti and K arrholm 2018). The study of urban rhythms is gaining significance in the context of urbanism in contemporary times (Amin and Thrift 2009). Within the framework of rhythmanalysis, we seek to unravel/explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the usual rhythm of activities in public spaces. In this context, the scenario of the Ganesh Mandir Road in Titwala, a small town situated in the Kalyan taluka of Thane district in Maharashtra, India has been selected for this study. Titwala is a part of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and is also considered to be an outer suburb of Mumbai. It is situated on the banks of the River Kalu, which is a tributary of the River Ulhas. For analyzing the rhythm of the place, experiences gained from field observations have been the main source of data. For establishing the theoretical foundations of the study an extensive review of literature on rhythmanalysis, urban life, and public space was conducted. In addition to this, articles, blogs, and reports on the changing characteristics of public spaces under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have also been referred to.

## **3.0 Public spaces and the rhythm of everyday life:**

Rhythm lies at the core of our everyday lives. There are temporal dimensions and living rhythms associated with people's activities and spatial forms that contribute to the composition of space (Ribeiro, 2019). Lefebvre (2004) emphasizes on the existence of four different notions of rhythms, namely – (i) arrhythmia, (ii) polyrhythmia, (iii) eurhythmia, and (iv) isorhythmia.

Arrhythmia is the conflict of rhythms. “In arrhythmia, rhythms break apart, alter and bypass *synchronization*...” (Lefebvre, 2004). Polyrhythmia refers to the coexistence of rhythms, where “heterogeneous rhythms co-exist simultaneously without being coordinated with each other” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2019). Eurhythmia is the harmony of rhythms. It “...presupposes the association of different rhythms” (Lefebvre, 2004). Isorhythmia refers to the equality of rhythms. “It designates an equality or a full equivalence between rhythms” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2019). Public spaces due to their inherent character depict distinct rhythms on an everyday basis.

The basic purpose of public space is to serve as a meeting place for people and depending on their use, their characteristics change (Maria 2018). As a result of the change in their characteristics the rhythm of public spaces also keeps changing. Based on the nature of use and associated regulations, the rhythms of public space may change daily or seasonally (Amin 2006). For example, the streets are mainly used for ambling and transit but are at times used for demonstrations and protests as well; the squares that are filled with people during the day remain mostly empty at night (Amin 2006). Although these rhythms may appear to be of similar nature for public spaces of a similar order, in reality, these rhythms are peculiar to each public space, thus, revealing their specific character. According to Harding and Blokland (2014) the reason behind this can be attributed to the fact that public spaces are ‘subjected to unwritten rules of interaction’. Therefore, how people act and react in public spaces can depend on several factors such as individual experience, social norms, collective psychology, and so on.

The rhythm of everyday life in public spaces encompasses a wide variety of activities, interactions, and symbolic exchanges. Amin and Thrift (2009) observes that everyday life is deeply related to activities, which are similar, different, as well as conflicting, all tied together by the common ground of the public space.

#### **4.0 COVID-19 pandemic and the rhythm of public spaces:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected humanity in various ways. The fear of infection and the need for maintaining social distance along with the imposition of lockdown measures in several places have transformed the ways in which people were accustomed to leading their lives. As a result, it is not only the lives of the people but also the spaces of their consumption that have come to be affected. With the changes in the spatial practices of the people, such as an increase in virtual interactions, adoption of a work-from-home culture, and predominance of e-commerce, and so on, the physical use of public spaces has reduced. Instead, public space in the form of digital platforms has become the part of life of many. Physical space has been replaced by virtual space. Presently, whether it is streets or parks or markets or playgrounds, all these spaces are deprived of the element of the public by the pandemic. A lack of human activity and the absence of social interactions have rendered public spaces a haunted appearance. Tamborrino (2020) notes that due to the pandemic, social interactions prevailing at the street levels have moved to windows and balconies. Rosmarin (2020) points out the grinding halt brought about to street-life by the pandemic all over the world. The lack of physical proximity has pushed interactions over the virtual space. Dhami (2020) observes that educational institutions have begun conducting their curriculum online, religious places have gone online so that the devotees can remain connected with the places of worship from the comfort of their homes, presence over social media has increased many folds, and online games are being played by more and more people.

The pre-existing rhythm of the public spaces has ceased to exist during the times of the pandemic. The ‘desolation of abandonment’ brought by the pandemic became highly apparent in the public space of India under the lockdown measures imposed throughout the country

(Smith 2020). The rights of the people in the context of the use and access of public space have come to be significantly compromised. In India, there have been several instances of people breaking the lockdown and coming out on the streets to meet their basic requirements only to be assaulted by the police with batons and to return home. Under such circumstances, the conventional social practices that were prevalent in public spaces prior to the pandemic, have now come to be replaced by fear, disorder, and chaos, thus, challenging 'people's sense of reflexive awareness and common experiences of community and belonging' (Eck, Melik and Schapendonk 2020).

## **5.0 Titwala Ganesh Mandir Road: A case study:**

In the urban areas of India, street/roads are known to be vibrant, active, crowded, and noisy. This is exactly how the Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala used to be until recently. At the one end of the road lies the Titwala Railway Station, which is a suburban railway station serving along the Central Line of the Mumbai Suburban Railway, and on the other end of the road stands the famous Mahaganapati Temple of Titwala, which is visited frequently by local residents as well as people from different parts of the state. Here, it is worth mentioning that 'Ganapati', also known as Ganesh, is the God revered most by the Hindus in the state of Maharashtra.

The Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala, in general, is busy in character; at least it used to be until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the declaration of lockdown following it. The prior existing rhythm in the Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala has come to be significantly disrupted under the impact of the pandemic and the measures of lockdown. For understanding the disruption of its rhythm, it is important that we first understand the rhythm of the road under normal circumstances, i.e. the scenario that existed before the pandemic. Accordingly, at first, the 'normal rhythm' of the Ganesh Mandir Road is described, and thereafter in context of it, the 'disrupted rhythm' has been presented.

### **5.1 The normal rhythm:**

The Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala during normal time is a busy road since the early morning itself. Although the roadside shops remain closed in the early morning, the movement of daily commuters through the road can be seen from almost 5.30 am. By the time it is 7 am, the road becomes filled with pedestrians, bikers, and auto-rickshaws packed with passengers rushing through the road to the railway station. Even some petty businessmen can be seen along the sidewalks of the road selling breakfast items to the daily commuters. Here, it needs to be mentioned that a large number of Titwala's residents are employed in Mumbai, Thane, and Kalyan to which majority of them commute regularly by the suburban railway, while others travel using their own vehicles (cars and two-wheelers). It is to be noted that after Mumbai, the cities of Thane and Kalyan are the two major centers of employment in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. The coordination existing between the daily commuters, auto-rickshaws, and the sellers of breakfast items, gives rise to 'eurhythmia'. After 8 am, the shops by the side of the road start gradually opening and this continues till around 10 am. Around these hours school buses carrying children to their respective schools through this road also can be seen. As noted by Alhadeff-Jones (2019) the opening of shops and the movement of school buses are 'polyrhythmic', as both the activities 'co-exist simultaneously yet they are not coordinated with each other in any way'. After 10 am the rush of the daily commuters gradually decreases, even the people who come to work in the locality from other areas have arrived by then. Since there are various shops and other commercial establishments along the Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala, several people can be seen negotiating and purchasing different commodities. A small

number of hawkers can also be seen daily during the day time selling vegetables, fruits, and various other commodities. The selling and purchasing of items are again 'eurhythmic' in nature. Between 1 pm to 3 pm, activities along the road reduce drastically giving it the appearance of a lazy area. After 3 pm, the road begins picking up its fast-paced rhythm of activities. Several hawkers selling different items can be seen settling along the sidewalks of the road with their ware. As the afternoon gives way to the evening, the Ganesh Mandir Road is flooded with the people returning from work and doing their evening shopping. Stalls selling street food items such as *Pani Puri*, *Wada Paw*, *Samosa*, *Dabeli*, and *Chinese Bhel*, etc. can be seen thronged by several people savoring these items. The number of vehicles on the road (both moving and parked) also drastically increases. The vibrant character of the road is at its peak after dusk when it is the most crowded and most noisy. The road being somewhat constricted near the railway station, it becomes heavily congested at this hour. It becomes difficult to walk in this area without bumping into people. To an outsider, it would appear to be chaotic and disorderly but to an insider the road functions in rhythmic harmony. The rhythm of activities during the evening represents both 'eurhythmia' and 'polyrhythmia' in the public space. After 9 pm, the shops gradually start closing down, and hawkers begin winding up their stuff; and the number of commuters and purchasers drastically reduces. The Ganesh Mandir Road gives way to the silence of the night from around 11 pm, after which only one or two people may be sighted randomly. The silence of the road continues until it is morning again.

## 5.2 The disrupted rhythm:

Under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, the normal rhythm of the Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala has become severely disrupted. Due to lockdown as the offices and business establishments were kept closed, the movement of daily commuters along the road came to a halt. In other words, the morning and the evening rush of commuters are not visible. Shops of essential commodities are only opening for limited hours as per the instructions from the government. The residents can be seen swarming to these shops for purchasing the necessary items needed by them during these relaxed hours. Hawkers selling fruits and vegetables can be seen during the relaxed hours only and that too in lesser numbers. The street food stalls, however are closed and vacant. The opening of shops and hawkers selling their items during relaxed hours along with residents coming out to purchase the essential commodities are of course 'eurhythmic' but the current eurhythmia is an outcome of fear, anxiety, and restriction rather than spontaneity. The movement of vehicles on the road has become a rare sight, with the exception of the police van which keeps patrolling down the road from time to time. Sometimes due to the presence of a large number of customers the shopkeepers can be seen keeping their shops open beyond the relaxed hours. However, the interference of the police takes place soon enough compelling the closure of the shops. People found on the roads after the relaxed hours can be seen interrogated by the police to make sure that they are only out because of some urgent needs such as visiting the doctor or purchasing medicines etc. and not merely loitering around or socializing. Shop keepers struggling to meet the demands of a large number of customers thus failing to close down the shops within the allotted time are being disciplined and penalized by the police, who are also restricting the movement of the people out of their home unnecessarily. All these actions leading to chaos and conflict represent the existence of 'arrhythmia'. A lack of harmony in the activities and disagreements are evident under the scenario as the people are compelled to change the course of their daily activities, which they are not used to. Before the lockdown, the noise of vehicles along the Ganesh Mandir Road used to overpower all other sounds, but now it is the barking of the stray dogs breaking the uncanny silence; mostly the hooting of the ambulance or the

announcements from the passing police vans are all that can be mainly heard along the road. As the day passes and gives way to the darkness of the night, the Ganesh Mandir Road turns dead silent. The barking of street dogs somehow seems to become more prominent during the night, echoing through the vacant space. The very character of the public space seems to have been lost.

## 6.0 Conclusion:

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the topic of public space to the forefront of global debates for revisiting and redrawing its characteristics. Public spaces across the world can be seen to have been crippled by the pandemic. The discussion made in this study reveals that under the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures of lockdown, the Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala has not only lost its normal rhythm of daily activities but also has succumbed to a disrupted rhythm which is disorderly and chaotic. As a result, the area has lost its charm as a public space. The study reinstates the importance of the healthy functioning of the public spaces with the daily rhythms occurring normally. When the normal rhythms of public space are disrupted, the public space becomes dysfunctional. Owing to the pandemic, such dysfunctional public spaces have emerged suddenly in abundance across the globe, the Ganesh Mandir Road of Titwala merely being one of such cases. To see whether the normal rhythm of public spaces returns, we must wait until the pandemic runs its course.

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